

# 'From Liberty to Magnolia'

Author to talk, sign books Tuesday at McComb Library

BY ERNEST HERNDON  
ENTERPRISE-JOURNAL

Janice S. Ellis grew up on a cotton farm in Amite County. Now she owns a farm.

She went to school in a small rural schoolhouse. Now she has a Ph.D.

She grew up in a house with a fireplace for heat, hand-drawn well for water and a garden for food. Now she's a retired executive who has written for numerous newspapers, magazines and websites.

This month Ellis, 68, published her autobiography, "From Liberty to Magnolia: In Search of the American Dream" (Christian Faith Publishers). She will give a talk and sign copies 6 p.m. Tuesday at McComb Library.

"I look at my life and I've had a remarkable journey coming from a small cotton farm between Magnolia and Liberty," she said in a phone interview this week. "And I thought, what better time to address the toughness of racism in the country and sexism in the country, and to talk in a positive way about those things and how those things don't need to define us."

The first half of the book details her life in Amite County, the second half her ventures into the world beyond. The book relates the good, the bad and the ugly—the good side of rural life and kind neighbors, the bad of poverty and hardship, the ugliness of racism and sexism.

"I want my book to be hopeful," Ellis said. "I think it's timely today because we see gender issues and race issues commanding and controlling the airways. So I'm hopeful that my book will be a learning tool, positive, to face up to the pain of it and also make a commitment to doing better."

Ellis, the daughter of the late Stafford and Mable Scott, grew up on Europe Bates Road halfway between Liberty and Magnolia. Her paternal grandparents were Holdens. She attended Tickfaw Baptist Church and has many relatives in southwest Mississippi, where she visits periodically.

In the book, Ellis recounts some of the dramatic events from her childhood, including a black man shot to death, another castrated, and a cross burned on her father's lawn.

She also recalls the more banal incidents that provided an undercurrent of tension in daily life, such as simply going to town in Liberty or Magnolia.

"At the one-and-only Malt Stand, blacks were often harassed or ignored if they tried to place an order to go, especially on a Saturday afternoon when it was crowded with white teens," Ellis writes.

One Saturday in Magnolia, her parents walked out of a dry cleaners and "two seven or eight-year old white boys spit at them," Ellis writes. "Mother and Daddy only



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*'The beautiful thing about Mississippi is that ... there was no pretense about race relations when I was growing up. It was all out there. That's not the same in America.'*

Janice Ellis

On leaving Mississippi

glanced at them as they hurried to the car out of fear of what could have resulted if they had said a word to them."

Ellis observed harmony between the races as well as meanness, sometimes at the same time.

"I saw a black neighbor helping a white neighbor get a cow off the road that had found an opening in an old run-down barbed wire fence as a car passed slowly enough for a cute little blond, curly-



headed five-year-old to spit and yell, 'Nigger.'"

Farther down the road, a white woman who sold Watkins products joked and laughed with a black customer.

Ellis loved the countryside, and playing in the woods and fields of her family farm sparked dreams of faraway adventures.

But when she left Amite County to attend Millsaps College, she found racism there as well, as white students refused to sit with black ones and walked across the street to avoid them.

"I helped integrate Millsaps College in Jackson," Ellis said. "I chose Millsaps to make sure I could cut the mustard, irrespective of my race and gender."

Racism didn't stop at the state line after she graduated, either.

"The beautiful thing about Mississippi is that having left Magnolia and the Liberty area and going to Madison, Wis., Milwaukee, Kansas City, there was no pretense about race relations when I was growing up. It was all out there. That's not the same in America," she said.

Ellis encountered another sort of discrimination as well: sexism. At the University of Wisconsin, white professors tried to discourage her from pursuing higher degrees since she was pregnant and planned to raise a family.

But she got a master's degree and a doctorate, and later went to work as the first black female director for a large pharmaceutical company. There she regularly received "outstanding" job performance ratings — but was always passed over for promotion to vice president.

"I hit the race and the gender ceiling there," Ellis said.

"No matter how good you are, no matter how qualified you are, you hit that ceiling."

But Ellis refuses to succumb to resentment.

"I grew up in a Christian home. My faith has sustained me through all my trials, whether they are personal or professional," she said.

"I give so much credit to my parents. Despite the oppressive indignities that they suffered, they were never bitter."

Plus, she said, "there's just

JANICE S. ELLIS FILE

- Bachelor's degree from Millsaps College, master's and doctorate from University of Wisconsin
- Executive in government agency, then at large pharmaceutical company
- President and CEO of her own marketing firm
- President and CEO of a child advocacy agency
- Written for Kansas City Star, Milwaukee Business Journal, community newspapers, radio stations, national trade publications
- Published online magazines USAonRace.com and RaceReport.com
- Writes regularly at JaniceSEllis.com

ing right, believing, and things are better," Ellis said. "I want to commend my hometown with how far we've come."

In addition to the other challenges she faced, Ellis survived an abusive first marriage. Now she and her husband Frank own their own farm in Missouri.

"America is still challenged when it comes to race relations and gender relations," Ellis said. "As far as we have come, we still need to address racial and gender inequality."

"It's not a blame game, it's not a 'woe is me' game, but we really need to be honest about our history, we need to learn about our history. Minorities and women make up the majority of the citizenry. We need to stop categorizing a whole race of people by the few, no matter what your skin color, no matter what your gender."

Author Janice Ellis will give a talk and sign copies of her book, 'From Liberty to Magnolia: In Search of the American Dream' at 6 p.m. Tuesday at McComb Library. At left are Ellis' maternal grandparents, the Rev. George and Fannie Holden. Below left, Janice Faye Scott in grade school at Europe Bates School.

no time. If you spend your energy being bitter and being a victim — what a waste."

Asked how she feels about her home area now, she cites "the goodness of Amite County and Pike County, the people."

That spirit will inform her speech at the library Tuesday, she said.

"I just want to talk about growing up there, but also the beauty and the growth of how you just keep living, do-

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